

# **A Qualitative Assessment of Veterinary Student Wellness**

Honors Research Thesis

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## ABSTRACT

Veterinary school can be a stressful environment. With heavy workloads, long hours, and high expectations, the stress acquired throughout veterinary school can carry out to the working field. Veterinarians are four times as likely to commit suicide compared to the general population, and twice as likely compared to other health care professionals. Currently, data using focus groups to identify how wellness is defined and supported within the veterinary curriculum is lacking, so crucial questions remain regarding how students define wellness, how educational programs can help support wellness, and what strategies students apply to help promote wellness while enrolled in veterinary medical education programs. The purpose of this study was to gather data about how veterinary students define wellness, what systems/factors contribute and inhibit student wellness, and what strategies students apply to promote or maintain wellness while enrolled in The Ohio State University (OSU) College of Veterinary Medicine program. Students currently enrolled in the OSU veterinary curriculum were invited to participate in voluntary, moderated focus groups, discussing topics related to wellness. The project included 8 focus groups, with a total of 27 student subjects. Focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and data were coded. Discussion included topics, such as the definition and domains of wellness, expectations of veterinary school, who contributes and is accountable for their wellness, factors that promote and inhibit wellness, and what is working well and strategies to improve upon in the OSU veterinary curriculum. The goal of this project was to bring awareness that wellness, whether physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, financial, intellectual, or social, plays a crucial role in the overall health of a person. Stress, anxiety, burnout, and thoughts of suicide are all possible, but dealing with issues in a healthy way is of the utmost importance. We believe this project will promote advancement in the education and awareness of student wellness.

## INTRODUCTION

Veterinary school is known to be a stressful environment. With heavy workloads, long hours, and other professional school aspects, the stress acquired throughout veterinary school can carry out to the working field (Hatch, *et al.* 2011). Those within the medical field and agricultural world, such as doctors, nurses, and farmers, are more likely to commit suicide compared to those in the general population (As reviewed by Platt, *et al.*, 2012). Veterinarians just so happen to be a combination of both the medical and agricultural worlds. Studies have been conducted to discover the overall well-being of veterinary surgeons. High expectations, poor work-life balance, difficult clients, and the act of performing euthanasia are all potential contributions to the stressful environment and cause of suicidal thoughts/behaviors and mental health issues (Platt, *et al.*, 2012). Veterinarians are four times as likely to commit suicide compared to the general population, and twice as likely compared to other health care professionals (Larkin, 2013).

With this issue being brought to light, universities in the U.S. with veterinary student programs are initiating support services and wellness programming. Questionnaires, surveys, and one-on-one counseling sessions are common methods for the detection of any dangerous stress, anxiety, or depression levels (Pickles, *et al.*, 2012). Even with these current health and wellness programs, many universities agree there is a long way to go, and substantial improvement is desperately needed in order to adequately monitor their students' well-being (Larkin, 2014). Although limited data are available, one study performed at Kansas State University discovered that almost one in every three students suffer from clinical depression, with depression rates peaking between the second and third year of schooling (Larkin, 2014). A focus group is a small moderated group discussion (Morgan, 1997). Currently, data using focus groups to identify how wellness is defined and supported within the veterinary curriculum is lacking, so crucial questions remain regarding how students define wellness, how educational programs can help support wellness, and what strategies students apply to help promote wellness while enrolled in veterinary medical education programs.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

All students currently enrolled in the OSU College of Veterinary Medicine graduation classes of 2017, 2018, and 2019 ( $n = 486$  students) were invited to participate in a moderated focus group about how students define wellness, what systems/factors contribute to wellness, what systems/factors are barriers to wellness, and what strategies students apply to promote or maintain wellness while enrolled in the veterinary medical education program. Students were invited to participate via email solicitations. All potential participants were sent identical solicitations, and focus group participation was voluntary. The Office of Responsible Research Practices determined the project exempt from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) review.

All focus groups were moderated by a single individual not related to the OSU College of Veterinary Medicine. The focus groups were held from September to November of 2015 and based on student availability due to exam and study schedules. Light snacks and beverages were provided. Focus groups were held in meeting rooms located on the OSU College of Veterinary Medicine campus. These meeting locations were easily accessible to potential respondents, but they were such that focus groups could not be observed by non-participants. The project included 8 focus groups and with a total of 27 participants. Each focus group contained 1 to 6 student subjects and ranged from 45-135 minutes in duration. There was no deception in the focus group discussions. No personal information of a sensitive nature was solicited or recorded. Focus groups were audio taped and audio recordings transcribed into Microsoft Word documents. Transcribed data were then coded. Coding responses into categories allowed the researchers to organize large amounts of text and discover patterns that were difficult to detect just by listening to a tape recording or reading a transcript (Berkowitz, 1997). During coding, numerous category codes were generated. In this study, category codes that were identified for wellness included

multiple aspects, social wellness, emotional wellness, spiritual wellness, physical wellness, financial wellness, and transitions. No identifiable information was recorded to maintain anonymity of study participants.

Focus groups were conversational and interactive, but the following eight questions were asked throughout each focus group:

1. How do you define “wellness” as a veterinary student? Domains of wellness can include financial, physical, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, social, or environmental.
2. Related to wellness, describe how you thought veterinary school would be, how you prepared for veterinary school, and what you wish you would have known prior to veterinary school.
3. Who contributes to your wellness as a veterinary student? Who is accountable for your wellness as a veterinary student?
4. What factors promote your wellness?
5. What factors are barriers to your wellness?
6. What specific strategies do you apply to promote or maintain wellness?
7. What is working well related to wellness in The Ohio State University Veterinary Medical education system?
8. What changes related to wellness would make The Ohio State University Veterinary Medical education system even better yet?

## RESULTS

After coding of the transcriptions were completed and categories were defined, statements that encompassed the focus group discussions and participants’ various viewpoints were identified. They are listed below under their corresponding category:

### 1. Multiple Aspects of Wellness

- “Other aspects of your life will fall behind if you only focus on your studies.”
- “It's like being in the middle of a 3 pointed magnet, and you're the magnetically attractive ball. You have to be careful not to get pulled towards one specific thing at a time, to the exclusion of all else.”
- “Priorities. You cannot fit everything in.”

- “I think Ohio State does try to do a really good job with communicating and learning life balances, emphasizing it is important to be a normal person as well as a vet student.”

## 2. Social Wellness

- “As far as wellness goes, I don’t focus on myself, which I probably should do. I tend to focus on my pets and I focus on my family and other people around me instead of actually paying attention to what I need.”
- “We are accountable for our own wellness, but I think a lot of people contribute to it, either in a positive or negative way.”
- “I like to talk to people outside of vet school too. I enjoy my friends at vet school, but I think it’s helped me gain perspective that your life just isn’t vet school”
- “It's very easy to have a sense of isolation, because you know how you're feeling, but we're really good at hiding it because we don't want to show weakness.”
- “We all share the same struggles, whether we choose to acknowledge them or not.”
- “People in our class can be really negative, because we’re all going through the same thing at the same time, and misery loves company. We can negatively feed off of each other.”
- “There’s a jealousy, and a not-friendly competition aspect to vet school.”
- “We feel like the administration is approachable. The faculty and professors and clinicians are super super approachable. Everyone wants to be there for you.”

## 3. Emotional Wellness

- “Things are taught here with the assumption that everyone learns the same way, which is sitting in a lecture and getting talked at. That, I think, is one of our biggest failings.”
- “It's like you were on a life raft, and you suddenly slipped over the water, and now you're trying to tread. So people feel like they're going to drown the way they are.”
- “It’s a very toxic environment, it’s a very traumatic environment, and I think that as a program, they need to deal with that, because we’re all getting traumatized in someway, whether anybody wants to admit it or not.”
- “In terms of wellness overall, ask yourself what makes you happy and do those things. Have your hobbies. Find what makes you happy and gives you a sense of fulfillment outside of school. Find things that you're good at that will give you positive

reinforcement, and do them. Because when vet school ain't going right, sometimes it's all you have to fall back on.”

- “I don’t think I could consciously encourage anyone to take this path if it wasn’t truly what would make themselves happy.”
- “When your whole identity becomes wrapped up in doing this and you don’t have an external life, that’s when it becomes traumatizing, because then your identity is threatened, your identity is under attack.”
- “The level of competency is inversely correlated with the level of stress we experience.”
- “I think people do need to be willing to talk about mental health and to seek help, because it's not weakness. You can't be a vet student, you can't be a veterinarian if you've committed suicide.”
- “When you’re exceedingly stressed out and you’re looking for help, you can’t go and search for it yourself. You just need to have it handed to you.”
- “I think that just having some mandatory lecture about suicide prevention isn’t suicide prevention.”

#### 4. Spiritual Wellness

- “I get up every morning, and if I do nothing else, I am grateful I am here. I don't care how shitty it is. I don't care how awful it is. I am grateful I am here.”
- “It's important to realize that we weren't entitled to this opportunity.”
- “It's important to remember that we are very very fortunate, and it could easily be us on the outside looking in.”
- “Coming into vet school, I don’t know if I really could eloquently state why I wanted to be a vet. When it’s so deep seeded in your soul, to want to do something with your life, I don’t know if words really can adequately explain.”
- “I had to understand why I was here again. It’s making me question whether I want to be a vet.”

#### 5. Physical Wellness

- “Taking care of yourself is probably one of the top priorities and we don’t do it enough.”

- “And then you get here and you're by yourself, you don't eat right, you study for exams, you get tired, you get stressed, and that makes you not sleep. So it's kind of like just a really big down hill spiral.”
- “I make sure I exercise at least 4 times a week, or else I don't feel like my brain is working, fully-functioning as well as it should be.”
- “I need to go workout, I need to go run, but right now, the thing that's going to kill me first is this test.”
- “I go to the gym when I can. I actually go to the gym a fair amount, because I've realized it makes me feel better, just mentally and also emotionally. Physically, I'm able to study better...but I have noticed that I'm sure my grades have suffered from that.”
- “When I'm thinking about physical activity, the exhaustion from vet school makes it feel like the last thing I want to do right now is try to start running.”

## 6. Financial Wellness

- “It's just not a priority. It'll become a priority when it is the priority, when we're out of here, but the priority now is surviving – making sure we get to the point where we can pay off the loans.”
- “Just thinking about how much I've already taken out, and I have three more years, and how much I'm going to have taken out with interest and how that builds up. It's just really hard to seeing ever paying that off and still have enough money to live.”
- “Where would our society be without veterinarians with the food supply, without doctors, without the pharmacists issuing the drugs? Our society would crumble, but yet, we are the ones who are getting punished.”
- “I was kind of naïve about the whole money, financial situation until after I was already in vet school and they had all the presentations in Professional Development. I knew about the loans and the huge numbers in theory, but I wasn't fully aware of how ridiculous the loans are, how long it would take you to pay that off with your salary as a veterinarian coming out.”
- “Do you really understand the financial hole you are digging yourself in? I think that's worth mentioning as well. The salary we're going to start out at compared with the load that we're going to have – it's not equal.”

## 7. Transitions

- “You get here, and you find out you're with people who are all at the right hand side of the bell curve, and someone has to fall to the left.”
- “When you come here, you have a feeling of competency, because you were a 4.0 student. You made it to vet school. And then when you get here, your whole identity, your whole competency that you felt prior to coming here is stripped, totally stripped. It's not that you willingly gave it up, it was taken from you.”
- “Knowing your learning style, and also understanding that your learning style may have to drastically change on very short notice, so that you can adapt to the mountains of information that you're going to be responsible for. That all ties into emotional and your mental and all other types of wellness.”
- “Grades don't make up who you are as a person, and it's so hard to remember that in vet school. It's really unbelievably challenging to remember that. Everybody wants to get good grades, and it's hard to accept not being the best.”
- “There's nothing that can really prepare you. There's nothing that can prepare you for what's about to happen to you.”

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gather data about how veterinary students define wellness, what systems/factors contribute to student wellness, what systems/factors are barriers to student wellness, and what strategies students apply to promote or maintain wellness while enrolled in the OSU veterinary medical education program. Participation in the focus groups allowed students to answer open-ended questions and provided the researchers with direct statements about the different viewpoints and experiences of a veterinary student. Although no experience is exactly the same, many students shared similar stories and testimonies, including the wellness associated with multiple aspects, social wellness, emotional wellness, spiritual wellness, physical wellness, financial wellness, and the challenges of transitioning to a veterinary student.

Students recognized the importance of keeping multiple aspects of wellness in balance. Focusing on only one aspect will not promote a healthy well-being. Veterinary school is a stressful environment, and the students can feed off of that negativity. Focusing on personal wellness, as well as personal growth, rather than comparing oneself to others' wellness and growth, can promote a more positive outlook on life and a healthier well-being. Students also acknowledged the difficulty of maintaining a healthy emotional wellness. Multiple factors, such as class material competency, lectures on mental health, and stress levels, all contribute to that emotional



wellness, whether in a positive or negative way. Having a healthy and positive method of coping with stress can help when going through a personal struggle.

Acceptance into veterinary school is a great achievement, because years of dedication and sacrifice were needed in order to get there. Although stressful, students recognized how lucky they were to be there, and remained grateful for the opportunity and experience. Concerning physical wellness, a healthy mind, as well as a healthy body, is important for wellness. Students identified that exercise, good nutrition, and a regular sleep schedule was crucial for learning the significant amount of material required for a veterinary student. Oftentimes, however, studying for exams took priority, and physical wellness fell to the side. The financial aspect of veterinary school is a difficult one, and can take a toll on a student's wellness. Recognizing the significance of tuition and loans earlier rather than later can help in understanding the process and sacrifice needed in order to pay it off in a timely manner. Many students also found it difficult to keep a job while in veterinary school, and although many tried to keep the stress of the loans out of their minds, the idea of being in such debt after graduation was a difficult one to accept. Transitioning to a veterinary student from an undergraduate student, master's student, or working individual is a challenge, and drastic changes must sometimes be made in order to adapt.

Although the opinions of the participants do not fully represent each veterinary student's experiences, the participants' testimonies may contribute to future studies regarding veterinary students, such as the various wellness coping mechanisms among different class years, gender, ages, support systems, and career goals, among others. The students' testimonies may also be beneficial information to those interested in working towards and applying to veterinary schools in the future. The results of this study will be presented to other veterinary schools in order to illustrate the importance of wellness programs in veterinary medicine programs. The results will also be presented to undergraduate, pre-veterinary students at The Ohio State University in order to provide real-life accounts of the experiences and challenges faced by veterinary students for those interested in pursuing a Doctorate in Veterinary Medicine (DVM).

The goal of this project was to bring awareness that wellness, whether physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, financial, intellectual, or social, plays a crucial role in the overall health of a person. Stress, anxiety, burnout, and thoughts of suicide are all possible, but dealing with issues in a healthy way is of the utmost importance. With the distribution of the findings to veterinary schools and pre-veterinary students, we believe this project will promote advancement in the education and awareness of student wellness.

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